

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 415

CG 017 244

AUTHOR Lehmann, Stan; And Others
TITLE Measuring Social Supports.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) --
Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Higher Education; Measurement Techniques; *Negative Attitudes; Predictor Variables; *Psychological Characteristics; *Research Methodology; Social Networks; Social Psychology; *Social Support Groups; Stress Variables; Well Being
IDENTIFIERS *Qualitative Analysis; *Social Interaction; Social Transaction Scale

ABSTRACT

Although social support has been operationally defined, a lack of conceptual clarity has made measurement modest and unreliable. To investigate the feasibility of measuring social support from a qualitative rather than a quantitative perspective, and to consider negative social interactions in the assessment, 130 college students were administered the newly devised Social Transaction Scale, the Social Network Survey, and three measures of well being. An analysis of the results showed that measures of quality or adequacy of available social resources rather than those of size or other quantitative characteristics of the social network were better predictors of psychological outcomes such as strain or well being. Negative social interactions were identified and divided into conflicts and obstacles. Social obstacles directly affected well being and school strain. Although social conflicts did not directly affect well being or strain, they were influential in the presence of stress. Network size, density, and multiplexity were not significant variables. (BL)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

MEASURING SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Stan Lehmann, Marybeth Shinn, Judd Allen and Pat Simko

New York University¹

A Social Transaction Scale was devised to measure qualitative aspects of social supports according to rationales derived from social psychological theory. Nonsupportive relationships were included as part of the measure. The utility of measures derived from this scale was compared to that of measures obtained from a commonly used scale that was quantitative in nature. Findings indicate that qualitative measures are better indicators of the effects on psychological strain. Negative relationships significantly influence the results. The expected theoretical factors were not encountered but the results suggest that two negative factors may differentially influence the outcome.

¹ Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Anaheim, California, August 1983.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

* This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

□ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Stan Lehmann

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

MEASURING SOCIAL SUPPORT

Stan Lehmann, Marybeth Shinn, Judd Allen, and Pat Simko

New York University

Social support seems to have become a nearly universal panacea for almost everything from "ring around the collar" to the "blahs". Like its frequent prime-time companion, stressful life events, its empirical image is trendy but it achieves only modest ratings and is not an altogether reliable performer. Some of these problems may come from the fact that the concept of social support is so intuitively compelling that its lack of conceptual clarity is not readily apparent.

Caplan (1974) has provided a working definition of social supports as attachments between individuals which promote mastery and offer guidance but, although this definition captures the theory of social supports, it does not help resolve the problems of measurement. Researchers are almost evenly divided between those who measure the number of social supports and those who measure the kinds of social supports. The former assess network size and some of its structural qualities. Among those who measure the kinds of social supports there is no common consensus as to what kinds of social supports there are. Often instrumental or tangible supports and emotional supports form a working dichotomy but instrumental supports represent a wide range of activities and emotional supports an even wider one. On the other hand,

Brown and associates (1975, 1978) suggest that only the relationship of confidant is crucial for stress buffering and Lin and his associates (1982) theorize that only strong social ties among like people are relevant to well-being.

A more analytic view has been taken by Weiss (1974) who has posited six functions for social support: attachment, social integration, opportunity for nurturing, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance and obtaining guidance. Henderson et al (1980) attempted an empirical test of Weiss' attributes and achieved at least partial evidence for four of them measured in terms of adequacy of support. On the basis of this study, Weiss (in press) has reduced his estimate to four: attachments, community linkages, nurturant investments, and acceptance of support. The work of Henderson (1980) and Duncan-Jones (1981) represents the beginning of attempts to explore the range of presumed social supports and their relevance for others.

The question of whether the number of persons in the social network or the kinds of support that are available is the most effective measure of social support is an empirical one. Psychological literature provides a set of social functions which are good candidates for social supports and which have already been tested. Instrumental functions which render tangible aid, information or guidance are recognized by nearly everyone as are emotional supports which elicit positive affect or relieve tension such as sympathy, understanding and affection. Social comparison processes (Festinger, 1950, 1954) have received a good deal of attention from social psychologists but have seldom been explicitly acknowledged by social support theorists. The need for

others as a reference point has been aptly demonstrated by Schachter (1959) and is fundamental to the theory of self-help groups (Caplan & Killilea, 1976). The motivating and stimulating effects of the presence of others has been amply noted (Allport, 1924; Zajonc, 1965) and embraced as the concept of social facilitation. This concept, too, is considered to play an important role in self-help groups.

Common sense suggests that the consequences of these social functions are not universally beneficial. Aid too readily given fosters dependency. Unwelcome advice is not stress reducing; unwelcome sympathy can be irritating. Inappropriate social comparison can lead to invidious contrasts and the presence of others can disrupt as well as facilitate behavior. It is not unlikely that the same people who provide social support sometimes also produce social harassment. Researchers have viewed social interactions as a source of stress (cf. McGrath, 1970). If this is true, then the sheer number of people in a social network may not be the best measure of support. Positive and negative consequences of social affiliation may also lie along separate continua as is the case for positive and negative affect (Bradburn & Caplowitz, 1965).

Method:

The preceding discussion can be summed up in two hypotheses: (1) Qualitative measures of social support will explain more variance in an outcome measure such as well-being than will quantitative network variables (size, density, or multiplexity); (2) It is necessary to consider negative social

interactions when assessing the effects of social supports. To test these hypotheses we used a readily available sample of college students (N = 130) at all levels from freshmen to graduates. A 24 item "Social Transaction Scale" was devised to cover each of the theoretical dimensions derived from psychological literature. Both positive and negative items were included for each of the four interaction dimensions. The response categories assess the frequency with which each dimension was available. A separate set of items inquired about the importance of each dimension. In addition, a shortened version of the popular McAllister and Fischer (1978) Social Network Survey was used to gather the more traditional measures of size, density and multiplexity.

In order to detect assumed consequences of the social interaction dimensions, measures of stressors, distress and well-being were taken. A stressful life events checklist of 42 items adapted from the Holmes and Rahe (1967) list and a 10 item scale listing common stressful school situations were administered. Distress, or the psychological response to stress, was measured with a scale, based on Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) measure, but emphasizing responses to school related stressors. Well-being was assessed with the Bradburn-Caplowitz (1965) affect-balance scale which separately scores positive and negative affect. Finally the usual demographic information was collected.

Results:

A factor analysis was run on the Social Transaction Scale to test the theoretical dimensions for social support. This analysis did not produce anything like the postulated structures. Instead, three well-differentiated

factors emerged: a factor comprising all of the positive social support items and two factors made up of negative items. One of these factors contained items like "How often do others want you to do things you don't want to do?" and we have labeled it "conflict". The other negative factor contained items like "How often does someone you know make things more difficult for you?" and we have labeled this factor "obstacle". Although they correlate moderately with each other ($r = .44$, $p < .001$), they behave differently in regression analyses. Both correlate only modestly with positive social supports ($r = .20$, $p < .05$ and $r = .25$, $p < .01$ respectively) indicating that they are not just the other side of the coin. The alpha reliability of the positive support scale with 12 items was .91 while that of the conflict scale with 6 items was .66 and that of the obstacle scale with 5 items was .62.

The Bradburn Affect-Balance Scale was used as a general measure of well-being but stressful life events, meant as a general measure of stress, did not influence well-being. School stressors, however, accounted for 10% of the variance in general well-being ($F_{1,100} = 12.04$, $p < .005$) while positive support accounted for another 13% of the variance ($F_{2,107} = 18.00$, $p < .001$). Social obstacles account for 2% of the variance but this is of borderline significance ($F_{3,106} = 3.43$, $p < .07$). Social conflicts seem to have little influence on well-being but the interaction of conflict with stress adds an additional 7% ($F_{7,102} = 9.86$, $p < .005$). The quantitative measures of support, size, density and multiplexity, do not show significant relationships to well-being.

The "Strain Scale" was constructed to specifically measure the effects of school stress and consequently stress accounted for 25% of its variance ($F_{1,109} =$

36.31, $p < .001$). Positive social support added another 4% to the explained variance ($F_{2,108} = 5.37$, $p < .05$). Social obstacles also explain 4% of the variance ($F_{3,107} = 5.59$, $p < .05$) but social conflicts result in a negligible increment. On the other hand, the interaction of conflict with stress adds over 3% to the explained variance ($F_{7,103} = 5.46$, $p < .05$). Once again the quantitative measures of social support do not relate significantly to strain

Discussion

The study provides confirmation for the hypothesis that measures of quality or adequacy of available social resources rather than those of size or other quantitative characteristics of the social network are better predictors of psychological outcomes such as strain or well-being. The hypothesis that all social interactions are not necessarily supportive is an extension of this idea and is also confirmed. The division of negative social transactions into conflicts and obstacles was not anticipated so that the differential effects of these two factors was not anticipated. The division is important, however, in that when the two factors are combined into a single negative measure, the effect on the outcomes of strain and well-being are seriously attenuated.

The availability of positive social supports is directly associated with well-being but less important in respect to school strain. Social obstacles have direct effects on both outcomes although their effect is only marginally significant for general well-being. Obstacles appear to have effects similar to stressors. Social conflicts seem not to have a direct effect on either well-being or strain but are influential in the presence of stress; that is

social conflicts exacerbate the effects of stress to produce a sort of negative buffering. While these effects are plausible, it is premature to judge whether the two negative social factors will consistently behave in this manner. In any event, negative social relationships do influence outcomes and should not be ignored in any study of social relationships.

The size of a social networks has only a modest relationship to positive social support ($r = .19$, $p < .05$) and minimal relationships to the two negative factors ($r = -.16$, $p < .1$ for obstacles and $r = -.11$, n.s. for conflicts). It is therefore not surprising that the relationship between network size and either affect balance or strain fails to reach significance. Neither density nor multiplexity show appreciable relationships to size, social or outcome measures. In addition, since network size encompasses both positive and negative social effects, it is not logically a good measure of the totality of social influences.

REFERENCES

- Allport, F.H. Social Psychology. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1924.
- Bradburn, N. and Caplowitz, D. Reports on Happiness. Chicago: Aldine, 1965.
- Brown, G.W., & Harris, T. Social origin of depression: A study of psychiatric disorder in women. London: Tavastock Pub. 1978.
- Brown, G.W., Bhrolchan, M.N., & Harris, T. Social class and psychiatric disturbance among women in an urban population. Sociology. 1975, 9, 225-254.
- Caplan, G. Support systems and community mental health: Lectures on concept development. New York: Behavioral Publications, 1974.
- Caplan, G. and Killilea, M. (Eds.) Support systems and mutual help: Multidisciplinary explorations. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1976.
- Caplan, G. Mastery of stress: Psychosocial aspects. American Journal of Psychiatry. 1981, 138, 413-420.
- Duncan-Jones, P. The structure of social relationships: Analysis of a survey instrument. Social Psychiatry. 1981, 15, (part 1) 55-61. (part 2) 143-149.
- Festinger, L. Informal social communication. Psychological Review. 1950, 57, 271-282.
- Festinger, L. Theory of social comparison process. Human Relations. 1954, 7, 117-140.
- Lin, N. Light, S.C. & Woelfel, M. The buffering effects of social support: a theoretical framework and an empirical investigation. Paper presented at the National Conference on Social Stress Research, Univ. of New Hampshire, October, 1982.
- Henderson, S., Byrne, D.G., Duncan-Jones, P., Scott, R and Adcock, S. Social relationships, adversity and neurosis: A study of associations in a general population sample. British Journal of Psychiatry. 1980, 136, 574-583.
- McAllister, L. and Fischer, C.S. A procedure for surveying personal networks. Sociological Methods and Research. 1978, 7, 131-148.
- McGrath, J.E. Social and psychological factors in stress. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970.

Pearlin, L.I. & Schooler, C. The structure of coping. Journal of Health and Social Behavior. 1978, 19, 2-21.

Schachter, S. The psychology of affiliation: Experimental studies of the sources of gregariousness. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959.

Weiss, R.S. Relationship of social support and psychological well being. In H. Schulberg and M. Killilea (Eds.) The modern practice of community mental health. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, in press. 148-162.

Weiss, R.S. The provisions of social relationships. In Z. Rubin (Ed.), Doing Unto Others. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Zajonc, R.B. Social facilitation. Science. 1965, 149, 269-274.